

The Situations

Joyce Carol Oates

I KITTENS

Daddy was driving us home. Three of us in the backseat and Lula, who was his favorite, in the passenger's seat.

Lula cried, Oh Daddy!—look.

At the side of the road, in broken grasses, was something small and furry-white, which appeared to be alive.

Oh Daddy, please.

Daddy laughed. Daddy braked the car to a stop. Lula jumped out of the car. We ran back with her, to discover in the broken grasses three small kittens—white, with black and russet markings.

We picked up the kittens! They were so tiny, fitting in the palms of our hands, weighing only a few ounces! Each was mewling, its eyes scarcely open. Oh, oh!—we'd never seen anything so wonderful in our lives! We ran back to the car where Daddy was waiting, to beg Daddy to take them home with us.

At first, Daddy said no. Daddy said the kittens would make messes in the car.

Lula said, Oh Daddy, please. We all promised to clean up any messes the kittens made.

So Daddy gave in. Daddy loved Lula best, but we were happy to be Daddy's children, too.

In the backseat, we had two of the little kittens. In the front, Lula was holding the whitest kitten.

We were so excited! So happy with the kittens! Lula said she would call the whitest kitten Snowflake, and we said we would call our little kittens Pumpkin and Cinder because Pumpkin had orange splotches in his white fur, and Cinder had black splotches in his white fur.

For some minutes, Daddy drove in silence. We did all the chattering! You could hear tiny mews, if you listened hard.

Then, Daddy said, Do I smell a mess?

We cried, No, no!

I think I smell a mess.

No, Daddy!

Three messes. I smell them.

No, Daddy!

(And this was so: None of the kittens had made messes.)

But Daddy braked the car to a stop. At the bridge over the river where there is a steep ramp, outside our town and about two miles from our house, Daddy parked the car and said to Lula, Give me Snowflake, and Daddy squinted at us in the rearview mirror and said, Give me Pumpkin, and give me Cinder.

We began to cry. Lula cried loudest. But Daddy grabbed the little kitten from her and reached into the backseat red-faced and frowning to grab Pumpkin and Cinder from us. We were not strong enough, and we were not brave enough to keep Daddy from taking the kittens from us, in Daddy's big hand. The kittens were mewling loudly by this time and quivering in terror.

Daddy left the car and with big Daddy-strides climbed the ramp to the bridge and threw the kittens over the railing. Three tiny things rising at first against the misty sky, then quickly falling, and gone.

When Daddy returned to the car, Lula cried, Daddy, why?

Daddy said, Because I am Daddy, who decides how things end.

II FERAL KISS

In secret, by foot, he traveled to the Mainland. He lived on an island of approximately eight square miles, boot-shaped like Italy. Between the Island and the Mainland was a two-mile floating bridge. His parents had forbidden him to journey to the Mainland; the Mainland was the "easy, slack life"; the Island was the life of discipline, severity, God's will. His parents had broken off ties with their relatives who lived on the Mainland, who in turn pitied the Islanders as uneducated, superstitious, and impoverished.

On the Island, there were colonies of feral cats, much inbred, ferocious if cornered or trapped, but surpassingly beautiful—one of the colonies was composed predominantly of flamey-orange tiger cats with six toes, another was predominantly midnight-black cats with tawny eyes, another was predominantly white, long-haired cats with glaring green eyes, and another, the largest colony, predominantly tortoiseshell cats with intricate stone-colored, silver, and black markings, and golden eyes, seemed to thrive in a rough, rock-strewn area near the floating bridge. It was generally forbidden for Island children to approach the feral cats, or to feed them; it was dangerous for anyone to approach the cats in the hope of petting them, still less capturing one of them and bringing it home; even small kittens were known to scratch and bite furiously. Yet, on his way to the Mainland, as he approached the floating bridge, he couldn't resist tossing bits of food to the tortoiseshell cats who regarded him from a little distance with flat, hostile eyes—Kitty? Kitty? Such beautiful creatures! One day, brashly, he managed to seize hold of a young tortoiseshell cat scarcely more than a kitten, very thin, with prominent ribs and high, alert ears, and for a moment, he held its quivering life in his fingers like his own heart seized out of his chest—then the cat squirmed frantically, hissed, scratched, and sank its small sharp teeth into the flesh at the base of his thumb, and he released it with a little cry Damn! and wiped the blood on his pant leg and continued on his journey across the floating bridge.

On the Mainland, he saw her: a girl he imagined to be his own age, or a little younger, walking with other children. The coastal wind was shrouded with mist, damply cold, relentless. Droplets of moisture had formed on his eyelashes like tears. Her long hair whipped in the wind. Her perfect face was turned from him in shyness, or in coyness. He'd grown daring, brash; his experience with the tortoiseshell cat hadn't discouraged but seemed to have encouraged him. He was a boy pretending to be a man here on the Mainland, where he felt to himself older, more confident. And here, no one knew his name, or the name of his family. He walked with the girl, drawing her away from the other children. He asked to know her name—Mariana. He held her small hand, which resisted his initially, as he clutched at it. He kissed her on the lips, lightly yet with much excitement. When she didn't draw away, he kissed her again, with more force. She turned aside as if to run from him. But he clutched her hand and her arm; he gripped her tight, and kissed her so hard, he felt the imprint of her teeth against his. It seemed that she was kissing him in return, though less forcefully. She pulled away. She snatched his hand and, laughing, bit him on the inside of the thumb, the soft flesh at the base of the thumb. In astonishment, he stared at the quick-flowing blood. The wound was so small and yet—so much blood! His pant legs were stained. His boots were splattered. He retreated, and the girl ran to catch up with the other children—all of them running together, he saw now, along the wide, rough beach littered with storm debris, their laughter high-pitched and taunting and not one of them glanced back.

Gripped suddenly by a fear that the bridge had floated away, he returned to the floating bridge. But there it remained, buffeted by coastal winds, and looking smaller, and more weathered. It was late autumn. He could not recall the season in which he'd started out—had it been summer? Spring? The sea lifted in angry churning waves. The Island was near invisible behind a shroud of mist. In the waves, he saw the faces of his older, Island kin. Gray-bearded men, frowning women. He was breathless returning to the Island across the rocking, floating bridge. At shore, he paid no heed to the colony of tortoiseshell cats that seemed to be awaiting him with small taunting mews and sly cat faces, amid the rocks. The wound at the base of his thumb hurt; he was ashamed of his injury, the perceptible marks of small sharp teeth in his flesh. Within a few days, the wound became livid, and with a fishing knife cauterized in flame, he reopened the wound, to let the blood flow hotly again. He wrapped the base of his thumb in a bandage. He explained that he'd injured himself carelessly on a rusted nail or hook. He returned to his life that soon swept over him like waves rising onto the beach, streaming through the rocks. There would be a day when he removed the bandage and saw the tiny serrated scar in the flesh, all but healed. In secret, he would kiss the scar in a swoon of emotion, but in time, he would cease to remember why.

III HOPE

Daddy was driving us home. Just two of us in the backseat and Esther, who was Daddy's favorite, in the passenger's seat.

Esther cried, Oh Daddy!—look out!

A dark-furry creature was crossing the road in front of Daddy's car, legs moving rapidly. It might have been a large cat, or a young fox. Daddy did not slacken his speed for an instant—he did not turn the wheel or brake the car to avoid hitting the creature, but he did not appear to press down on the gas pedal to strike it deliberately.

The right front wheel struck it with a small thud.

There was a sharp little cry, then silence.

Oh Daddy, please. Please stop.

Esther's voice was thin and plaintive, and though it was a begging sort of voice, it was a voice without hope.

Daddy laughed. Daddy did not brake the car to a stop.

In the back, we knelt on the seat to peer out the rear window—seeing, in the broken grasses at the side of the road, the furry creature writhing in agony.

Daddy—stop! Daddy, please stop, the animal is hurt.

But our voices were thin and plaintive and without hope, and Daddy paid little heed to us but continued driving and humming to himself, and in the front seat, Esther was crying in her soft helpless way, and in the backseat, we were very quiet.

One of us whispered to the other, That was a *kitty*!

The other whispered, That was a *fox*!

At the bridge over the river where there's a steep ramp, Daddy braked the car to a stop. Daddy was frowning and irritable, and Daddy said to Esther, Get out of the car. And Daddy turned grunting to us in the backseat, and Daddy's eyes were glaring angry as he told us to get out of the car.

We were very frightened. Yet there was no place to hide in the back of Daddy's car.

Outside, Esther was shivering. A chill wind blew from the mist-shrouded river. We huddled with Esther as Daddy approached.

In Daddy's face, there was regret and remorse. But it was remorse for something that had not yet happened, and could not be avoided. Calmly Daddy struck Esther a blow to the back with his fist, that knocked her down like a shot, so breathless she couldn't scream or cry at first but lay on the ground quivering. We wanted to run away but dared not for Daddy's long legs would catch up with us, we knew.

Daddy struck us, one and then the other. One on the back, as Esther had been struck, and the other a glancing careless blow on the side of the head as if in this case (my case) the child was so hopeless, he was beyond disciplining. Oh, oh, oh!—we had learned to stifle our cries.

In long Daddy-strides, Daddy returned to the car to smoke a cigarette. This had happened before but not quite in this way, and so when a thing happens in a way resembling a prior way, it is more upsetting than if it had not happened before, ever in any way. On the lumpy ground in broken and desiccated grasses, we lay sobbing, trying to catch our breaths. Esther, who was the oldest, recovered first, crawled to Kevin and me and helped us sit up and stand on our shaky stick legs. We were dazed with pain and also with the sick sensation that comes to you when you have not expected something to happen as it did, but, as it begins to happen, you remember that you have in fact experienced it before, and this fact determines, in the way of a sequence of bolts locking a sequence of doors, the certitude that it will recur.

In the car, Daddy sat smoking. The driver's door was open partway, but still the car was filling with bluish smoke like mist.

Between Esther and Daddy, there was a situation unique to Esther and Daddy, as it had once been unique to Lula and Daddy: If Esther had disappointed Daddy, and had been punished for disappointing Daddy, Esther was allowed, perhaps even expected, to refer to this punishment provided Esther did not challenge Daddy, or

disappoint Daddy further. A clear, simple question posted by Esther to Daddy often seemed, to our surprise, to be welcomed.

Esther said, a catch in her throat, Oh Daddy, why?

Daddy said, Because I am Daddy, whose children must never give up hope.

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